IMAGE OF THE EMERGING WOMAN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF FLORA NWAPA AND BUCHI EMECHETA: A CRITICAL STUDY

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The title of the thesis is *Image of the Emerging Woman in the Select Novels of Flora Nwapa And Buchi Emecheta: A Critical Study.*

The two renowned women writers of Africa, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta are the most celebrated contemporary writers whose works speak boldly and evocatively for the empowerment of women and other marginalized sections of their society. Their writings are extremely poignant observation of their society in which traditional and the social context tend to devalue women and conventional feminine attributes where the women are forced to end up bearing a disproportionate burden of coercion and exploitation. They focus on things that really matter and stick to showing things realistically. Their novels are rooted in humanitarian themes exploring issues of gender bias, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, polygamy, social injustice and sexual exploitation. Through their novels they express their deep concern for the agonies of women. While trying to register their disgust at male chauvinism and the oppressive patriarchal system, they remind the women that the social condition of a society or a nation could be gauged by the standing status of its women. They adamantly encourage the women to aim high by educating themselves. They show education, economic independence, and self assertiveness as important steps towards liberation since there is a strong correlation between women's education and their overall progress including their economic development, and this empowerment of women is the need of society and the nation. Without probing deep into the feministic aspects, the present dissertation aims to study how these writers intend to create awareness in the women by appealing to them realistically, thoughtfully, and emotionally through their writings.

The thesis comprises of four chapters which can further be divided into three parts.While the first chapter is introductory, the second and third chapters are the analyses of select novels of the two writers respectively and the last chapter makes an appraisal of the whole study.

The first chapter is entitled as Introduction.

It offers an overview of the literary tradition of Africa and traces the roots from which Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and other women writers of genius have emerged. While discussing the impact of colonialism on the Africans who had to undergo centuries of exploitation and humiliation, it also studies how the spread of the European system of Education benefitted the African people by increasing the level of aspirations amongst them and also by giving birth to writers which in turn gave scope to open new avenues for the expression of the African spirit to the contemporary world. They could express their thoughts in the European languages and draw the attention of the world towards the predicaments faced by the Africans. The African writers thus played a vital role in the enlightenment of their spirits as well as the achievement of their dreams.

The world of African literature, until the recent times has been a masculine domain. After the second world war, as the process of decolonization began, writers from the newly independent African countries started to dominate the literary scenario. Majority of the African literary works, in all genres have been produced by male writers who by and large, relegated women to a secondary place writing from their point of view. If some of them mythologized women as 'Mother' or 'Earth', others presented a distorted and stereotyped image of women. They portrayed them as complacent individuals, cheerfully accepting their inferior status allotted to them by men in a male dominated society.

African women who constitute nearly half of their continent's population are paradoxically not treated on par with men in all spheres of human activity. Despite the fact that they slave for the development of their husbands and children they are oppressed, suppressed, and marginalized in matters of sharing the available opportunities for the fulfillment of their lives. Women in African societies are subjected to gender bias. Lack of educational opportunities, unhappy marital lives, barrenness, polygamy are the major issues that weigh them down socially, economically, psychologically, and physically. The male writers failed to present a realistic picture of the African woman in their writing.

An attempt is made in the introductory chapter to briefly discuss the thematic concerns and the difference is the depiction of the African woman and the actual position of woman in the African society.

The unrealistic portrayal of the image of the African woman has been corrected only after the emergence of women writers. As more and more African women got educated and they began to enter social and political spheres, the women writers began recording and interpreting the changes they have been undergoing in their contemporary societies. As they have been suffering in their patriarchal societies, they could experience the pains of these women who have been living in bondage to men since times unknown. Thus the picture of the cheerful and contended female complacency, presented by the male writers came to be replaced by a picture of the exploited woman who could evaluate her position in a patriarchal society and desire to live freely and fully.

With the rise of the Black women writers, there has been a drastic change in the African literary scenario. They wrote about the issues that concern the traditional African women. Education, Marriage, Motherhood, emotional and economic independence, political and economical marginalization of the women, domestic violence, the women's resistance to oppression, etc are the major themes of their works. Their writings mirror their concern about the status of women and their commitment to free women from all modes of oppression. Further the writings of Mariama Ba, Nadine Gordimer, Grace Ogot, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Rebeka Naju, Zaynab Alkali, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Ifoema Okoye are briefly touched upon.

Among the women writers of Africa, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta from Nigeria are two significant writers who through their writings have attracted the world's attention. Their reputation as major and compelling voices in African women's liberation movement rests upon their protest against the victimization of women in their societies. Their unique contribution to the African literature lies in their strong commitment to the representation of the life stories of the African women. Through their writings they show how in African culture, women have been subjected to oppression, depression, suppression, rejection, segregation, and unfair victimization. They also show how

women are impacted on by economic deprivation, illiteracy, and social discrimination. They directly and forcefully attack the sexist ideology, female despondency, and gender inequality and register their disgust at male chauvinism. They succeed in showing that, the African woman is an individual in her own rights besides being a wife and mother. In other words, Nwapa and Emecheta act as spokeswomen for the rights of women.

The chapter also briefly introduces the two writers and, their works,their particular iconoclastic approach to the tradition and fictional motifs that lend a distinct identity and universal appeal to their writings.

The second chapter entitled **"Valiant Victories**" deals with the works of Flora Nwapa. She is the first west African woman to publish a novel in English. She has won an unparalleled reputation for her artistic excellence as a novelist. The principal concern voiced in her novels is feminism. What makes her feministic writings special is that most of the characters are realistic. Her feministic perspective is projected through her unconventional and self assertive heroines. They are all independent, industrious, and positive in thinking. She commits herself to the depiction of strong role models of women by introducing a female literary tradition, Nwapa gives a genuine, reliable identity to 'African Woman' in African literature. Her works highlight the 'New Woman' concept.

Among the six novels authored by Flora Nwapa, only three novels have been chosen for the study and they are *Efuru (1966), Idu (1969)* and *One is enough (1981):* These three novels are heroine oriented and these heroines though face adversities in their lives, finally, emerge as examples of self assertive, independent, competent, and highly individualized African women. They represent the emerging 'New Woman' in African society, seeming to emancipate herself from the restrictive traditional norms imposed by the patriarchal set-up. In these novels, Nwapa portrays the 'African Woman' as an embodiment of many thing s; an African, patient and long suffering, hard working, well wishing, distinguished, symbolising the universal woman, struggling for her independence and demanding her rightful place in the social set-up.

In her first novel, *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa projects the image of a truly heroic female protagonist, a' new African woman', who rebels against the established traditional norms,

heralding the dawn of female emancipation. Her first heroic female character, Efuru, is a daring and defiant, self reliant and self assertive woman, possessing a high level of intelligence, competence, and integrity of character. She is an embodiment of every feminine virtue and grace. In spite of her tedious sufferings, her will and determination is unbroken. She is an icon of the new and awakened African woman.

The protagonist Efuru comes from a distinguished family. She is a typical Igbo village young woman, but highly individualistic. She is a remarkable and outstanding figure in her society. The entire community of Efuru, admire her for her extraordinary talents, pleasing manners, and good-will. She is good, honest and noble in her trading. People who come in association with Efuru, would not help liking her. Despite all her assets, she suffers inwardly due to her barrenness upto a period of time, unpleasant marital life, abandonment of her two husbands, Adizua and Gilbert, loss of her only child, and accusation as an adulteress. Though the story of Efuru appears to be tragic it is not a tragedy actually. The author portrays the triumph of the protagonist when she moulds her as a worshipper of Uhamiri, the lake Goddess, who grants her devotees all the comforts, riches, and success. Hence the narrative can be marked as the tragedy and triumph of a 'New African Woman'.

Flora Nwapa's second novel, *Idu*, is a successful Igbo novel in which she deals with the theme of barrenness in marriage, which is of great concern to the Igbo woman. The novel examines and revises the prevalent notions of marriage, barrenness, motherhood, social responsibility, self sacrifice, humanity and above all, wifehood. It also embraces the emotional, social, economical, and political forms under which Igbo life is manifest. Nwapa presents her protagonist as an assertive, individualistic and non conforming woman who, with her awakening confirms the arrival of the truly heroic woman character in African literary world.

Idu, the heroine of the novel, is a courageous woman. She is a beautiful, kind-hearted, loving, responsible, and industrious woman, who is admired by all in her community, she is a devoted wife to a doting husband. Though she is a highly successful market woman in her business, sadly she suffers because of barrenness which is considered as a failure in any woman. Her friends, well wishers, and other associates are

not sure whether it was a divine curse or a moral laxity. But after several years of married life she gives birth to a baby is on the day of an eclipse indicating something ominous. Idu after a long period of four years becomes pregnant once again but this time before the delivery, her beloved husband dies a mysterious death which shocks her. Nothing ,neither her son nor her pregnancy could stop her from joining her husband in the land of the lates. Idu challenges the established norms of patriarchy by rejecting life and children and prefers to follow her husband. Her commitment towards her husband enriches her with courage and strength to transcend even death by rebelling against the norms, customs, and practices of her tribal community that had been handed down by the ages. Thus by, asserting her individuality, she emerges as a 'New African Woman'. Nwapa portrays Idu as a trend setter and as a progenitor of a new generation.

One is enough is Nwapa's third novel in which she reinvents the image of the African woman, by manifesting womanist consciousness in the unraveling of the protagonist. She presents her as a strong and individualized woman who emerges successfully from all the burdens of the patriarchal society. She portrays her heroine as decisive in stepping beyond the institution of marriage when it proves to be an insurmountable barrier to her self-actualization. Through her, Nwapa disproves the erroneous belief that a woman is nothing without a husband.

Amaka, the protagonist of the novel is an educated, industrious, and independent woman. While unmarried, she always longed to get married. Once she gets married to Obiora she encounters exploitation, disappointment, deception, sexual domination, and barrenness. Made miserable by marriage, she pays off the bride price and frees herself from the marital bond. She leaves for Lagos to lead an independent life. There she involves herself in the 'attack-trade' and achieves her life's goal of becoming a successful and wealthy woman. Subsequently she becomes the mother of twin sons but refuses to marry their father because she is strongly determined to seek happiness and fulfillment by being a single woman and mother. By rejecting the offer of marriage, she emerges as a 'New African Woman' who proves to the world that woman can successfully live outside the institution of marriage.

The chapter thus discusses the primary themes featuring in the novels of Nwapa and traces the process of 'Awakening' in her women protagonists.

The third chapter, entitled "**Arduous Awakening**" deals with the pre-eminent Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta . As a writer she combines great depth and intensity of emotions rendered with appropriate literary skills. Her simple style of writing conceals an unexpected subtlety, sophistication, and insight into the complexities of women's lives. Over the years she has acquired wisdom and compassion in unraveling the depths and heights of feministic consciousness. Her novels mainly focus on women's issues in general, and the themes of gender bias, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, polygamy and sexual exploitation in particular. War, racial prejudice and immigration are the other themes that figure in her writings. Though her writings she has proved that real life experiences are capable of being transformed into literature. She has drawn comparisons with other renowned writers, and not without reason her fiction has that realistic style, richness, and a sensibility that characterize majestic writing. Having set her authorial eyes on the conditions of women living in her continent, she becomes one of a growing number of African women writers who have formed an intense new voice of African womanhood. Emecheta does not allow her heroines to accept defeat . Instead she makes them put up resistance, challenge their fate and emerge as 'New African Woman'.

The Joys of motherhood (1979), *Second-class citizen* (1974) and *Gwendolen* (1989) are the three novels of Emecheta selected for the critical study in this chapter.

The Joys of motherhood is a unique story which explores the tragic implications of a traditional African mother. The protagonist of the novel, Nnu Ego, is the most traditional, oppressed, powerless, and illiterate of all of Emecheta's heroines. The novelist narrates Nnu Ego's life by focusing on her craving for motherhood, and then her slavery to her children, her sacrifices, her realization of difficulties and sufferings involved in motherhood and finally, her tragic death.

Nnu Ego's first marriage turns out to be a failure because of her barrenness. This time her father chooses a city dwelling man Nnaife to be her husband. Though she finds him too ugly to bear with, she accepts him in the hope that he might turn her into a fruitful woman. He certainly does but unfortunately her first born dies and unable to bear

with this, she tries to kill herself, but is saved. Later she becomes the mother of nine children. She wrestles throughout her life in order to be a perfect mother and her children disappoint her utterly through their imperfectness. According to the belief of her traditional society, a mother of so many children, especially the boys, is expected to enjoy a privileged state of happiness but Nnu Ego experiences not joys but sorrows of motherhood all through. She gradually realizes that there were not gains but only pains in motherhood. Finally one day she dies a miserable death on the road side all alone, as any other barren woman. When a shrine is built in her memory, she refuses to grant the wishes of the infertile women who come to worship her for children. Though too late, awakening comes to her in her death. By making her protagonist reject the patriarchal glorification of motherhood, Emecheta turns her into a 'New awakened African woman'.

Emecheta's second novel *Second class citizen* (1974) is a record of her experiences on the dole, and her life in London. The novel opens with the protagonist, Adah's childhood, her fortunes and misfortunes. Despite the indifference and hostility of her family she successfully completes her secondary education and obtains a good job. She marries Francis much against the will of her people and later goes to join him in London, where she faces both racial and gender discrimination. Racial discrimination due to the colour of her skin and gender discrimination due to her husband who always tries to maintain his African male power and supremacy over her, beating and ill-treating her. On realizing that she is treated as a second class citizen and this citizenship is derived more from anatomy than colour, she takes a step towards liberation by rebelling against her husband's tyranny and finally leaving him with her children there by putting an end to all forms of oppression.

In this novel, Emecheta's concern is not merely the male dominated society's attitude to sex, she is equally concerned with how gender bias affects the attitude of work. Through Adah's refusal to settle down for a second-class status, Emecheta reveals the strength of woman in oppressive atmosphere. She shows how with new awareness and determination women can triumph over everything impossible and gain the status of 'New African Woman'.

Gwendolen (1989) is Emecheta's Eleventh novel in which she treats the controversial and significant subjects of rape and incest. The protagonist of the novel, Gwendolen, at a very young age of seven, is molested by her uncle Johnny and in her adolescence, by her own father. She finds it impossible to complain against them in and hence suffers silently. Even with her mother she faces bitter experiences. A healing process begins for Gwendolen in the company of Emmanuel, whom she meets later. He remains a steadfast friend and companion throughout her difficulties- right from the discovery of her pregnancy and nervous breakdown till the birth of the child. Later she daringly tells him that he was not the actual father of the child. Even after telling the truth, she manages her friendship with him through love and care. But she refuses his offer to give her a name and she prefers to remain a friend. Her story does not end pessimistically as the story of an incest victim rather it turns her into a matured self-sufficient mother, a human being, and above all a 'New African Woman'.

This chapter discusses how the heroines of Emecheta Nnu Ego, Adah and Gwendolen fight against the odds, break themselves free of oppressive social norms and herald the dawn of emanicipation and in the process, enrich the women's world.

The fourth and the last chapter is an attempt to have a critical appraisal of the novels of Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta. The important themes, thematic similarities and the intertexuality of their novels are also discussed. A summing up of the preceding chapters is attempted.

The two writers, who carved out prominent places for themselves in the African literary world, mirror their undeniable brilliance as modern thinkers and writers with astonishing clarity. Writing in English, at a time when few women, especially African women, used this medium for literary expression, Nwapa and Emecheta presented pictures of their own world. The value of their writings lies in the depiction of the degraded status of women and the crumbling social order viewed through the prism of feminist sensibility. Their series of writings aim at, quite admirably, 'to demonstrate the existence of a female tradition' in fiction which is both enriching and encouraging. Through their writings they have redefined the definition of feminism. They are mainly concerned with issues like gender inequality, sexual exploitation of women, restrictions

imposed on women by certain traditions followed in patriarchal societies, and their consequent struggle against these oppressive traditions.

Nwapa and Emecheta design their heroines as role models to the women of their society. Their novels in spite of being entertaining, also prove to be educative. Nwapa if through Efuru demonstrates that women can be happy and fulfilled without children, through Idu shows that children are equally important to her as her husband and through Amaka shows how a woman can successfully live outside marriage. On the other hand, Emecheta through NnuEgo rejects the patriarchal glorification of motherhood, through Adah, reveals the strength of women in oppressive atmosphere and her refusal to settle down from second class status and through Gwendolen proves to the woman's world that a woman can overcome any sort of complexity in life and be joyous and contented in her own world of peace and happiness.

In fact, the writings of Nwapa and Emecheta shed light on how women have to manage to establish themselves as individuals. Though it may appear to be not an easy task for them to make it to the top, considering the entrenched biases and prejudices in their societies, they have worked out their best to enter every sphere of human activity and bring out a social transformation. Their works try to remind the fact that gender bias, meaningless traditions, and harassments of all sorts are to be fully eliminated from the society and they need to go many miles ahead to usher in an era of real women empowerment. Through their well crafted stories with effect of the 'Awakening' of the heroines of their novels, they motivate the African women to derive inspiration from them, achieve their individualism, and establish themselves as 'New African Women'. Ogunyemi, the Nigerian critic, aptly compares Nwapa and Emecheta saying, "If Nwapa is the challenger, Buchi Emecheta is the fighter".